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UNITED NATIONS

HUMAN RIGHTS

With the exception of the pursuit of peace, there is no cause with which the United Nations is more closely identified than the cause of human rights. Throughout the world, UN actions in the field of human rights have saved lives, prevented torture, won the release of prisoners, brought about the reappearance of "disappeared" persons, promoted health and literacy and protected the rights of refugees and displaced persons. Provisions of UN treaties have been written into national legislation, affording millions of people the legal basis for claiming respect for their rights. Even when not incorporated into national law, UN standards and the spotlight of UN attention have proven to be powerful tools, curbing abuses and helping restore democratic Governments.

To strengthen this deep commitment to the cause of human dignity, the World Conference on Human Rights will take place in Vienna in June 1993, at the invitation of the Government of Austria. The objectives of the Conference are:

► to review and assess progress made in the field of human rights since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948;

► to identify obstacles and ways in which they might be overcome;

► to examine the link between development and the enjoyment of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights;

► to examine ways to improve the implementation of human rights standards and instruments;

► to evaluate the effectiveness of United Nations methods and mechanisms; and

► to recommend ways to ensure adequate financial and other resources for UN human rights activities.

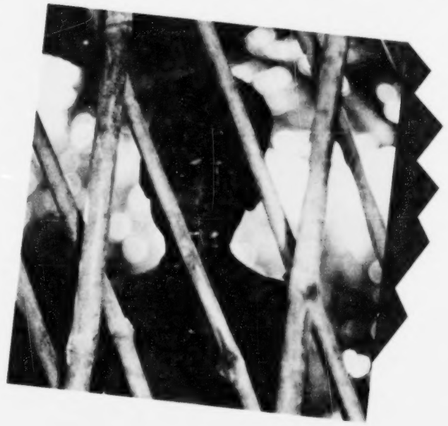
The Conference will examine the achievements of the UN human rights programme, evaluate its present status and give it future direction. Particular emphasis will be given to achieving universal ratification of basic human rights instruments, promoting human rights education and stepping up technical cooperation programmes to ensure the necessary national infrastructure for promoting and protecting human rights in every country.

The UN Under-Secretary-General for Human Rights, Antoine Blanca (France), is Secretary-General of the Conference. The Under-Secretary-General is also the Coordinator of the 1993 International Year for the World's Indigenous People. The United Nations Centre for Human Rights is the secretariat for the Conference.

Based in Geneva, the Centre serves as the focal point of the United Nations in the field of human rights, provides secretariat and substantive services to United Nations organs concerned with human rights, including the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and their subsidiary bodies, carries out research and studies, administers the programme of advisory services and technical assistance on human rights, coordinates with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and collects and disseminates information.

BACKGROUND AND PREPARATIONS

In December 1989, the General Assembly requested the UN Secretary-General to seek the views of Governments, UN agencies and bodies and human rights NGOs as to the desirability of convening a world conference to deal at the highest level with the crucial questions facing the United Nations in the promotion and protection of human rights. The Assembly felt that a world conference could make a major contribution to the effectiveness of the UN and its Member States. The idea received wide support.



On 18 December 1990, the Assembly decided to convene a World Conference. Governments, UN specialized agencies and bodies, international and regional organizations and NGOs were invited to participate in the World Conference and to assist in pre-Conference preparations.

A Preparatory Committee was established, open to all UN Member States or Members of the UN specialized agencies. The Committee is to make proposals to the Assembly on the Conference's agenda, participation and documentation and on preparatory meetings and activities at the international, regional and national levels. Its first session took place in Geneva on 9–13 September 1991, and its second session met in Geneva on 30 March–10 April 1992. The third session is scheduled to be held from 14–18 September 1992, and the fourth in March 1993, both in Geneva.

All countries agreed at the Preparatory Committee that the Conference should not be a meeting of States only, and that NGOs could make an important contribution. Various NGOs have already taken part in the Committee's discussions, stating their views on different aspects of the Conference. The World Conference secretariat will prepare a number of action-oriented studies for submission to the fourth session of the Preparatory Committee and to the Conference.

Proposals on the agenda of the Conference have been made by the African Group, the Asian Group, the Latin American and Caribbean Group and the Group of Western European and other States. The UN Commission on Human Rights and several expert bodies have also given their comments.

The preparations and the Conference itself are to be funded through the regular UN budget. Countries have been invited to make extra-budgetary contributions to meet the cost of participation for the least developed countries. Some Governments have already contributed funds.

Regional preparatory meetings are scheduled for late 1992 or early 1993 in San José, Costa Rica, for Latin America and the Caribbean; in Bangkok, Thailand, for Asia and the Pacific; and in Tunis, Tunisia, for Africa. In addition, other meetings are also envisaged as part of the preparatory process.

UN ACTION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Under the UN Charter, one of the basic purposes of the United Nations is to promote and encourage respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion. Toward that end, the UN is at work on many fronts:

Setting standards The UN has set international standards in some 70 covenants, conventions and treaties, beginning with the UN Charter (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Such standards cover almost every aspect of human existence and are accepted throughout the world.

Drafting legally binding treaties Among the UN treaties that make legally binding, for States that ratify them, the rights set forth in the Universal Declaration and other UN instruments are seven monitored by treaty bodies. These treaties include the two International Covenants (on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and on Civil and Political Rights); the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Setting up procedures The UN has developed a wide range of procedures to oversee respect for these treaties. States Parties must submit periodic reports to UN committees of independent experts, who discuss compliance with Government representatives and make recommendations for improvements. Under some treaties, the committees are empowered to deal with complaints submitted by individuals.

Appointing rapporteurs and working groups For serious violations, such as arbitrary or summary executions, torture or disappearances, the UN appoints a special rapporteur or a working group. The UN also examines the human rights situation in a specific country through the work of a UN special rapporteur. The rapporteurs and working groups draft periodic reports which are publicly discussed at the UN (including at the General Assembly), thus drawing world attention to human rights violations.

Sending urgent-action cables In response to alleged cases of disappearance, torture and summary or arbitrary execution, rapporteurs and working groups send urgent-action cables to the Government in question, appealing for the protection of the individual concerned. Some 1,000 such cables are sent every year.

Considering appeals from individuals Under a special procedure, the UN is empowered to consider petitions from individuals and groups alleging cases of human rights violations. In 1990, over 120,000 such appeals were processed, and Governments were asked to comment on them.

Assisting countries in protecting human rights The UN assists countries in revising legislation, creating national infrastructure, training officials through advisory services and technical cooperation and establishing broad support for human rights through information and education. As a result, national human rights commissions have been created, penal and other laws revised and human rights institutions strengthened.

The World Conference on Human Rights will take place 25 years after the International Conference on Human Rights, held in Teheran, to mark the International Year for Human Rights and the twentieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Attended by 84 countries, the Teheran Conference gave new direction to the work of the United Nations on human rights. With the cause of human rights continuing to be at the heart of the international community's search for peace, stability and well-being, it is hoped that the Vienna Conference will strengthen UN programmes and inspire renewed international commitment to the cause.

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